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Contact: Ray Ladd
(805) 756-7432, rladd@calpoly.edu

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Architecture Student Hopes to Apply Lessons of History to Former San Francisco Landmark

SAN LUIS OBISPO -- As Cal Poly architecture student Jonathan Lopez resumes his studies this year, he is working on how to apply the lessons of pre-Columbian ruins of Central and South America to an almost-vanished San Francisco landmark.

Last fall, Lopez, a fifth-year student from San Diego, traveled to Mexico and Peru as part of a fellowship he won in a competition for the best student proposal combining study and travel. He now is focusing those lessons on the remnants of the Bay city's Sutro Baths to see what use the site might have in contemporary times.

The Sutro Baths, an enclosed complex of seven salt-water swimming pools, were built by Adolph Sutro late in the 19th century just north of the Cliff House on San Francisco's Pacific headlands. Covering three acres, the baths dazzled the public in their brief heyday, accommodating 10,000 people at a time. The complex also included an amphitheater seating 3,700, restaurants that could feed 1,000 people at a time, and exotic exhibits of various sorts.

After decades of declining popularity and conversion to a skating rink, the baths burned in 1966. The site, with only foundations remaining, is now part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

In choosing the Sutro Baths as the subject of his final undergraduate project, Lopez said he isn't trying to recreate the grandeur of the baths as they existed in the late Victorian era.

"I desire to create architecture that reflects the uses of people of today, as opposed to the people and culture of the turn of the century," he said.

Among the possibilities Lopez is considering, as part of his preliminary design work, is combining the architectural elements of two different uses, a Benedictine monastery and a hospice and palliative-care facility.

Lopez said his travel in Latin America gave him new insight into the relationship between past and present.

Last year Lopez won the prestigious RTKL Worldwide Fellowship, offered by the architectural firm of RTKL Associates in Washington, D.C., with a plan to examine spiritual architecture and the role that procession -- journey, arrival, departure -- played in ancient spiritual spaces. The fellowship began with a summer internship in the firm's offices, giving Lopez valuable experience in several aspects of architectural practice.

The fellowship also included \$4,000 to pay for a study trip to the Mayan ruins of Chichen Itza, the Inca city of Machu Picchu and the ancient religious center of Teotihuacán near Mexico City.

"I had an opportunity to spend several days at each of the ruins and study the transformation that structures experienced," Lopez said. "The modern cities near the ruins also offered insight into how architecture is an organic, ever-changing entity. Visiting and documenting these sites enabled me to discover that architecture, whether new or old, must be responsive to its current context."

"Clearly the RTKL Fellowship was a tremendous honor, and it has had an enormous impact already in Jonathan's academic career and professional education as a future architect," said Architecture Department Interim Director Allan Cooper. "Through the travel experience, he was able to couple essential topics of architectural education such as history, theory, culture, building and settlement patterns with his undergraduate design thesis."

Lopez expects to finish his design proposal this spring and receive his Bachelor of Architecture degree in June.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: Photos of Lopez are available from Ray Ladd at (805) 756-7432 or rladd@calpoly.edu.

